

## Jeremiah Grace, Northeast Charter Schools Network

### Appropriations Committee Testimony

March 13, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of Connecticut's charter schools and families. I am Jeremiah Grace, Connecticut State Director for the Northeast Charter Schools Network. NESCN is a membership association representing charter schools across the state.

I would like to start by commending the Governor for supporting the idea that charter schools, and thus charter school children, should have access to school safety and security funds. The program supports safety and security related facilities projects, and charter schools should be allowed to compete for the use of these funds.

Last year charter schools were left out of the security infrastructure competitive grant applicant pool. There are 18 charter schools open in Connecticut, serving an estimated 7,000 students. It is hard to understand how so many children and their families could be excluded from a program designed to improve safety.

So I was happy to see the Governor included charter schools in the most recent proposal, which opens another round of funding for up to \$10 million in facilities upgrades. After all, children are the same regardless of the type of school they choose to attend, and students in one school are not inherently more or less worthy of investment than students attending another. To be clear, we support the inclusion of all types of schools in this proposal, and are happy to see that technical schools were included as well.

Charter schools serve many communities and families considered to be "at-risk" due to socio-economic circumstances and home zip code. These families have chosen a charter school because they believe it will help provide the academic and life skills needed in order to transcend these obstacles. In fact, two-thirds of the students enrolled in Connecticut's charters qualify for free- and reduced-price lunch, a key indicator of socio-economic need. For many of these students crime and neighborhood violence is a real issue. Sometimes those violent trends do invade schools. Often families choose a charter school because it provides a better education than they would otherwise receive, both in academic preparation and also by providing a structured, safe environment.

I point this out because it is important to remember these students should be treated fairly and have safe and secure school upgrades, just like their counterparts. Just last year one of our member schools, Side by Side, did experience a security breach, and it was a very scary reminder that safety cannot be taken for granted. The outcome for that incident thankfully resulted in no injuries to students. I would like for us to learn from that experience and do everything possible to help schools so that there is no next time, when the outcome could be much worse.

There is another point I'd like to make today. Charter schools often are held to the same standards as other schools. Especially on the issue of school safety, nobody would argue that the highest possible standards should not be in place for all schools. On the contrary we know that charter schools strive to meet the highest possible bar for security and safety. However, charter schools are unique in that we are held to standards but not always given access to the funds needed to meet those goals. Charter schools already operate on less per-pupil funding than traditional district schools. To be excluded from competitive improvement programs makes the funding disparity even worse. It is why I'm grateful to the Governor for including us in this round of funding. We appreciate his leadership and we hope the General Assembly will support the proposal.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can answer any questions or provide support on this issue.